

Home Food Processing

Setting up a food-processing business in your home has advantages and disadvantages. You can make your own schedule and cut commuting expenses. On the other hand, there may be added costs involved in getting your kitchen up to Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA) sanitary standards, and working at home will definitely impact your family—just ask any successful entrepreneur.



If you haven't yet talked about your business idea with your regional PDA office, do so now. PDA sanitarians have a wealth of information and knowledge about food processing in general and regulations that specifically apply to commercial sale of foods processed in the home. Since all information discussed with the sanitarian remains confidential, don't worry about revealing your recipe to a stranger. The assistance you gain will greatly outweigh the potential for compromising trade secrets.

The 50% Rule

PDA charges a modest annual fee to register food businesses. However, processors are not required to pay the registration fee if more than 50 percent of the ingredients are grown by the processor. This exemption, known as the "50 percent rule," typically applies to farmers or individuals with very large gardens who are selling canned goods, jellies and jams, dried vegetable soup mixes, dried fruits, or candied apples.

Regulations for Home Kitchens

Before taking too many steps toward setting up a home food business, contact your local municipal planning office to verify that you will be able to operate a food business at your home; ask for this verification in writing so that you can share it with the PDA sanitarian. In addition, if your home's source of water is a private well, you will need to have it tested before you can register to commercially manufacture foods.

In addition to local zoning, water testing, and sanitation requirements, PDA has specific regulations that apply to people who plan to

work out of their homes. Here are some requirements that home food processors need to know:

- **During commercial processing, no part of the home kitchen may be used for personal food preparation.** This means that home food preparation and commercial food processing operations cannot be conducted at the same time. This kind of "dual-use" kitchen requires you to carefully schedule your time so that private and business activities do not conflict.
- **Ingredients used for your food business must be kept separate from ingredients for personal use and must be properly stored and protected.** Proper storage includes using food-grade containers that keep pests out and maintaining temperatures that do not promote spoilage. One entrepreneur turned a closet in an adjacent room into her work pantry by putting a door through the kitchen wall.
- **No animals are permitted in the home at any time.** If you have family pets, you'll need to keep them outside at all times or find an alternate place to do your food processing.
- **Children are not permitted in the kitchen area during commercial processing.** This might be tough for families with young children but ideal for those with kids who attend school outside the home. People with young children and home-schoolers might be able to work this out with careful scheduling, child care help, and a lot of patience and commitment.
- **Home manufacturing of potentially hazardous foods (PHFs) is permitted if prepared in a**

separate kitchen used only for this purpose. PHFs are foods that because of their high moisture and low acid content can become unsafe to eat if they are not kept refrigerated. PHF examples include milk or other dairy products, eggs, meat, and cooked pasta or vegetables. Pennsylvania regulations forbid the manufacture of PHFs in a dual-use home kitchen. Instead, you will need to construct a completely separate kitchen that is used only for your food business. Keep in mind that no PHF products may pass through or be stored in the home at any time; therefore, you may need to construct separate entrances and exits to food processing and storage areas. Ask a PDA sanitarian for more information if you decide to make PHF products in your home.

Along with the guidelines listed above, specific categories of home-processed foods must meet additional requirements.

Canned foods

Pennsylvania regulations allow commercial canning of naturally acidic foods (e.g., apples, peaches, lemons) or acidified foods (e.g., pickled vegetables, salsa, chow-chow) in dual-use home kitchens under the conditions listed above. However, under no circumstance is commercial production of low-

acid canned foods (e.g., corn, beans, soups, and vegetable mixtures) allowed in home kitchens.

If you decide to make acid or acidified canned-food products in your home for sale to the public, you will need to carefully document your recipes and processing methods. You will also be required to prove that the product equilibrium pH is 4.6 or lower by having it tested at a commercial laboratory. You must use new canning lids each time. Reused jars must be thoroughly washed and sanitized before filling. You may also be required to register and file your process with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Check with a PDA sanitarian to make sure you are following all state and federal regulations before you start canning.

Jams and jellies

Home processing of jams and jellies is permitted in dual-use kitchens as long as you document and adhere to all written procedures and formulas. Although pH testing is not required, these products must be tested at a commercial laboratory to make sure they meet quality standards for soluble solids content. Requirements for new lids and sanitization of used jars are the same as described above.

Home baking

Shelf-stable bakery items such as breads, cookies, and muffins can

be produced in a dual-use home kitchen. However, high-moisture/low-acid items such as cheesecakes, pumpkin pies, tortes, creams and custards, and meringue pastries may be potentially hazardous and, as described above, may only be made in a completely separate kitchen. The PDA sanitarian may require you to have these products tested for pH and water activity.

Candies

Because of their very low water content, hard candies such as lollipops, candy canes, and rock candy are not considered potentially hazardous foods and can be commercially prepared in dual-use home kitchens. However, for some products, such as cream-filled chocolates, fudge, or candied fruits, the amount of moisture available for microbial growth can vary widely depending on the recipe. For these types of products, PDA may require you to have your product tested for water activity at a commercial laboratory to determine if they are potentially hazardous.

For more information, contact your regional PDA office or the cooperative extension office in your county or visit www.PaFoodVentures.psu.edu.

*“Sometimes ingredient substitutions in your recipe can mean lower costs. Keep an open mind.”
—Pa. food business owner*

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